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6 January 2004

RUS42259.E

Russia: Update of RUS34780.E of 7 July 2000 on the treatment of ethnic Lezgins and available state protection
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

In Russia, the predominantly Muslim Lezgin (Lezgi, Lezgian, Lezghi, Kiurinsty) ethnic group is centralized in Dagestan on its southern border with Azerbaijan (*Ethnologue* 2003; CIDCM Nov. 2002; *Europe-Asia Studies* 1 Jan. 2001; Jamestown Foundation 25 Nov. 1998). Although population estimates from the late 1990s account for less than 300,000 Lezgins in Russia (CIDCM Nov. 2002; Jamestown Foundation 25 Nov. 1998), according to a preliminary analysis of the 2002 All-Russia Census, the Lezgin community totals 411,600 persons (RFE/RL 19 Nov. 2003).

The Research Directorate found little current information on the treatment of members of the Lezgin community among the sources consulted. In 2001, academics Robert Ware and Enver Kisriev noted that Lezgins have been involved in all levels of the Dagestani political structure including local soviets, the People's Assembly and the State Council (*Gos Sovet*) as well as the federal Duma in Moscow (*Europe-Asia Studies* 1 Jan. 2001). A political party seeking to represent ethnic Lezgins in the federal Duma called the Federal Lezgin National-Cultural Autonomy was reportedly a member of the left-wing nationalist Glazev electoral bloc in August 2003 (InfoProd 31 Aug. 2003).

The most recent update of the Minorities at Risk (MAR) risk assessment for ethnic Lezgins said little about the treatment of the group within the Russian Federation, focussing instead on the relations of the minority with the federal government (CIDCM Nov. 2002). It did mention that, with respect to the social situation faced by Lezgins in Dagestan,

... Lezgin[s] are among the most disadvantaged of the Dagestani groups, and there appears to be little effort to rectify the situation on the part of local officials. Sources report that unemployment among young Dagestani Lezgins is as much as 80 [per cent], due largely to the collapse of both the defense industry that was concentrated in their region and traditional Lezgin sheep herding. One suspects that these figures may be exaggerated, or that many Lezgins are supporting themselves in the "unofficial economy" that still thrives across the former Soviet Union (ibid.).

Although a number of reports mention attacks across the Russian Federation on Muslims and/or individuals believed to be from the Caucasus region (Prima News 1 Dec. 2003; *Washington Post* 23 Dec. 2002; *Vremya MN* 20 Apr. 2002; Interfax 27 June 2002), the Research Directorate found only one report specifically mentioning a Lezgin (UCSJ 2 May 2003). In this case, an unspecified number of Lezgins were reportedly assaulted in Krasnodar-Kray by a group of 50 to 60 Russian teenagers who attacked "any dark-skinned person they saw" (ibid.). In addition to Lezgins, the report also mentions Armenians, Bzidid, Meskhetian Turks and ethnic Russians as being victims of the same attack (ibid.).

Human rights groups believe that an "upsurge in hate crimes throughout Russia, some related to ethnicity, others connected more directly with the presumed Islamic heritage of the victim" are were incited by the events of 11 September 2001 in the United States and the October 2002 Russian theatre siege perpetrated by Chechen guerrillas (*Washington Post* 23 Dec. 2002). Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) describes Russia as a country where

simmering racism and xenophobia have long been tolerated. The post-Soviet upswing in nationalism-evident in the rise of white-supremacy groups and the recent parliamentary sweep of parties running on extremist patriotic agendas-have brought the problem bubbling to the surface, often in the form of violence (2 Jan. 2004).

Further, there have been regular reports of skinheads attacking non-Russians (*Vremya MN* 20 Apr. 2002)

and numerous incidences of racist harassment and abuse (RFE/RL 2 Jan. 2004). A July 2003 estimate reports by Moscow's Department of the Interior that 3,000 illegal acts are perpetrated against foreigners in Moscow every year (ITAR-TASS 3 July 2003).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

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Additional Sources Consulted

Internet sites, including:

Caspian Net

Johnson's Russia List

Lezgin News Group (Yahoo Groups)

Minorities at Risk. *Lezgin Chronology* (1990-Sept. 1999)

News from Russia (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

Norwegian Institute for International Affairs (NUPI), Centre for Russian Studies

Russian Monitor

Slavic, East European, and Former USSR Resources, Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University Library

State Committee on Statistics of the Russian Federation

Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO)

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